

## A Reflection on the *Hail Mary*

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The *Hail Mary* prayer is meaningless outside the context of the Communion of Saints. The Communion of Saints is the relational aspect of the Body of Christ. That is, those who are baptized in Christ and who follow him participate in a unity of heart, a love for one another that is willing to give of self for the good of the other.

In its essence, the *Hail Mary* is a request that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, join us in our prayer for ourselves to God. We are asking Mary to give herself to prayer for our good.

The first half of the *Hail Mary* prayer is a conflation of Gabriel's first words to Mary at the Annunciation and Elizabeth's words to Mary during the Visitation—both in Ch. 1 of Luke's Gospel.

The second half of the prayer is a creedal statement about Mary and then our request that she pray for us.

The prayer begins with a greeting, "Hail, Mary," equivalent to "Hello, Mary." The English word *hail* is actually a blessing: "Good health be to you" or "May you have good health." The Latin word *ave* and the original Greek *chaire* do not carry this sense. Rather, they are simply greeting words, like English "hello" or "well met."

This greeting and direct address of Mary opens an intimate expression of heart. If the speaker of the prayer does not use these words to enter into heart-felt relationship with Mary, then the time spent of the prayer is wasted. With these words we enter into the heart of Mary by opening our own heart to her.

Next we describe her to herself as "full of grace," reflecting the Latin *gratia plena*. The Greek original is more faithfully translated "most highly favored (one)." Important here is the superlative: *full* or *most highly*. Of all creatures, God has made Mary most perfect. With these words, we exalt the perfection of Mary. We declare her to be a perfect, faultless human being—made so by the election or the grace of God.

So far we have: "Hello, Mary. I open myself to you in loving simplicity. You are the most perfect of human beings, most favored by God."

Then we say, "The Lord is with you." Having declared that she is the most perfect and most favored of human beings, we recognize the cause of that perfection and favor—the Lord of all is with her, and with her perfectly and completely. Mary is the transparent vessel of the Lord—she shares his very nature. Unlike us sinners, there is nothing in her which separates her from the love—the torrential love—which God is willing to pour out on her, as on all of us, if we but opened ourselves to it. We close ourselves to God's love. We turn our attention away from the Newness of Life—the present being which characterizes all things that exist, and which is the creative spirit of God from which all things arise and endure through time. We limit the flow of God's loving grace through us to others.

In Mary are none of these obstacles. She lives purely in the present being of God the Almighty Creator. And the love of God flows through her unobstructed and unlimited, out to other people.

Because Mary is always present to the Lord, the Lord, is always present to her, that is, Mary always knows the will of God and always does God's will unhesitatingly. That is the meaning of the Hebrew phrase, "The Lord is with you," namely, that the person of which that is said is doing the will of the Lord. (Cf. Nathan to David re: building a temple to God.)

So, in this phrase, we recognize Mary as living perfectly in the presence of the Lord (where we all exist, if we were only to recognize that) and unstintingly doing his will.

In the next phrase we get to the heart of the issue: Mary was chosen by God to be the one who brings the Savior into the world. First we say, "Blessed are you among women." The original Greek word translated *blessed* here and in the next phrase is *eulogemenos*, which literally means "well-spoken of." So we are saying, "You are highly praised among women"—not "among people," but specifically "among women." This praise is directly related to her womanly ability to give birth. Mary is worthy of praise because it is she who has brought the God-Man into our world.

This, of course, is the reason why she is "full of grace" or "highly favored." This is the reason for her perfection as a human being faithful to God. It is fitting that the one who gives birth to the God-Man should herself be perfect as a faithful human being.

The next phrase is the final scriptural phrase in the prayer, and more important, it is the core of the prayer's meaning: everything before it leads up to it, and everything after it derives from it. The phrase makes explicit why Mary is "highly praised"—and that is because the one she brings into the world, the "fruit of your womb"—yours, and yours alone—is the God-Man who has come to save all humanity: Jesus.

The name Jesus, then, occupies the center of this prayer to Mary. This is fitting, of course, because it is the special worth of Jesus that gives special worth to the one who gave him birth. Mary's act of giving birth is at the center of human history because the one to whom she gave birth is the center of human history.

This prayer to Mary has meaning and worth exclusively because at its core is Jesus, the God-Man come among us, through Mary, by means of Mary. Her unequivocal Yes to the will of God at the Annunciation and her humble joy at being chosen by God as the vessel to house the Savior and to deliver the Savior to the world were the wide-open floodgates through which the love of God for us gushed forth as Jesus.

Our salvation—all of human history—hung in the balance as the young Mary pondered Gabriel's words and then turned her heart to conform herself to the will of God.

Because at that crucial moment—and throughout her life, even as she suffered her own child's pitiless execution—she always conformed herself to the will of God—always lived in the presence of God's spirit—we call Mary "holy" in the next phrase: "Holy Mary, Mother of God." She allows the spirit of God to penetrate her completely, to fill her fully. She shares in the Divine Nature—in the bountiful existence of all things, saturated with love—and so, we call her "holy," sharing the nature and attributes of God, as we know them.

This phrase, “Holy Mary, Mother of God,” is of course direct address. We call upon Mary to come to our assistance with her intercession for us.

The title “Mother of God” is an ancient title for Mary, approved at the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Council of Nicea to the universal approbation of the faithful. The original Greek—*theotokos*—literally means “the one who brings God into the world.” The emphasis of the original is on the female capacity of giving birth. Together with the two previous phrases beginning with the word *blessed*, this phrase makes clear that Mary is honored for the unique act of birthing the God-Man into our world. That she did so completely willingly and lovingly is beyond dispute. But the focus of the Greek term is on the birth act, while the focus of the Latin term *mater dei*, literally “mother of God,” extends to the whole process of mothering, of which giving birth is just one part.

In addition, the term *mater dei* is subject to misinterpretation and can cause confusion and elicit ridicule from the opponents of the Catholic Church. The term does not mean—cannot mean—that Mary, a human being, a creature of the Divine Creator somehow precedes the Eternal God as God’s parent and somehow gave birth to YHWH, the Limitless, the Unknowable, the Almighty God.

The Greek term *theotokos* avoids that problem of interpretation by focusing exclusively on the birth act. Mary functioned as the channel through which the God of Heaven slid into corporeal human life. As sexist as it might appear to some today, Mary is revered strictly for her function as birth-giver, and it is for her functionality that she is highly praised as the one uniquely chosen and prepared spiritually by God for her great work.

Compared with Mary in her humble greatness, all the rest of us on earth are miserable sinners, as we admit in the next phrase of the prayer—and we call on this perfect, God-chosen creature to intercede with God for us in our lowly sinfulness. We ask Mary to “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

Do we ask Mary to do this for us because we believe that her prayers are more effective than the prayers that our own earthly mothers—or our friends or members of our parish, or complete strangers—might pray for us? I think the answer is No. No one’s prayers move the eternally wise God to change his will about us or about anything. (“Who has taught God anything, or given him counsel?”) Nor does Mary have to intercede for us that God forgive our sins. That forgiveness has already been accomplished by Jesus on his cross. No further prayers are necessary.

The purpose of asking Mary to intercede for us is that the plan of God for all creation—that all creatures be united as one in perfect love and care for one another—might be furthered. We cannot accomplish this universal unity—nor our small part in achieving it—on our own. For we are, as we admit, sinners. We are prone to choose ourselves over God’s will. We need the grace of God to accomplish his will and to overcome our sinfulness. It is for this grace, this healing, this growth toward spiritual maturity that we ask Mary to join us in praying for.

Moreover, as sinners, we can become fearful of judgment at the time of our death. Recognizing our imperfect spiritual discipline, we can become anxious for our salvation. To combat this fear and anxiety, we need God’s gift of faith and trust in him. We ask Mary to join us in asking God for this grace of faith, both now—when we always live lives that could be

strengthened by increased faith—and at the moment of death—when we can be strengthened and encouraged by the faith that God wants us to be with him even more than we do, and that he will guide us and protect us—each one of us personally (Jn 14)—through the door of death into the bright light of eternal life.

The prayer itself, then, not only expresses the desire that the Universal Body of Christ come to cohere perfectly in love, but also in doing this, the prayer accomplishes that purpose, in its limited way. We pray that God's plan might be achieved, and in doing so, the plan itself is furthered toward perfect achievement.

Mary and we together pray that we on earth might be g raced to stop sinning, to stop defying God's universal plan and to come without fear into perfect conformity with his will—as Mary our intercessor is, perfectly.

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